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"We are an earth people": Imagining the Planetary through the Community of Mixed Memories in Cherríe Moraga's *Circle in the Dirt*

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Introduction

The emergence of Chicana/o literature is not so much a consequence of globalization as a cause that would urge us to redefine American literature from a global perspective. In the United States, the so-called "Hispanic" population has grown to be the largest minority group today, and this tends to be regarded as the consequence of globalization driven by economic disparity within the Americas. A further consequence of this human migration is the dispute over illegal immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, especially in the 1980s when the cases increased dramatically in U.S. society. However, for Chicana/os, the charges of illegality for crossing the border are not necessarily reasonable. The Chicana writer and thinker Gloria Anzaldúa condemns the "illegal" invasion and occupation of Mexican territory by the Texas Republic, the event that eventually led the two nation-states to wage the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848. Defeating the Mexicans in the battle, Anzaldúa states, Americans "pushed the Texas border down 100 miles, from *el rio Nueces to el rio Grande*" and "the border fence that divides the Mexican people was born" from the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (29). Therefore, in Chicana/o's historical perspective, the so-called illegal crossing is not simply a consequence of human migration in a rapidly globalizing world but rather of the human impulse to return home, as Anzaldúa terms it, "the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlan," with its direction this time "from south to north" (33).

In this paper, I shall explore how Chicana/o literature actually contributes to a more globalized and revised sense of definition of American literature by recapturing the view of Chicana/o literature as collective narratives that have reflected their complex historical, cultural, political, and economic relations with the neighboring U.S. entity. Chicana/o literature's resistance against the ideas of boundary and homogeneity, which are strong stabilizing forces for culture and society, signal disintegration and dissemination of such ideological categories as race, gender, culture, and nation-states. Doing so also enables us to rethink the presumption of Americanness in American literature. I will begin my discussion

by delineating how the Chicana/o concepts of "borderlands" undermine the modern conception of nation-states by examining not only postcolonial but also of ecocritical discourses, especially in terms of the planetary significance of place and community. I then shall interpret Cherríe Moraga's play, *Cricle in the Dirt,* and illustrate how a play written by a Chicana playwright works as artistic praxis in dissimilating and deconstructing the modernist notion of nation-states. Imagining the heterogeneous community in the borderlands, Moraga represents the Chicana/o sense of place and community in the play, which leads to redefinition of American literature and Americanness not only from global but also planetary perspectives.

I. Decline of Nation-States and Foregrounding "the Borderlands"

Regardless of legality and historicity, people of Mexican descent in the U.S. are doubtless a physical reminder of the international border between the U.S. and Mexico. However, the more the presence of the border is emphasized, the less intelligible the very definition of a border and nation-states becomes, as various forms of artistic expression such as literature only make visible the reality of human conditions and experiences in the border regions. Homi Bhabha points out the "ambivalence of the 'nation' as a narrative strategy" and describes "nation" as "an apparatus of symbolic power," which "produces a continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or 'cultural difference' in the act of writing the nation" (201). In Bhabha's case, this sense of "continual slippage," or a sense of being out-of-place, comes from an observation from his existential reality as a migrant--rather than immigrant--who has lived "the moment of scattering of people" as "a time of gathering," which includes "gatherings of exiles and *émigrés* and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centers; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present" (199).

Bhabha's sense of "continual slippage" may be equivalent to Anzaldúa's experience on the borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico because both Anzaldúa's theory of borderlands and Bhabha's concept of "continual slippage" to some extent exemplify a discourse that challenges the modern confining notion of nation-states as a domain that preconditions one's identity and homeland. As a sense of identity and homeland continues to slip from a preconditioned definition, what has been presupposed to be a nation or nation-state turns to be blurred. In Anzaldúa's artistic recreation of the borderlands, too, this confining sense of domain becomes obscure when the borderlands extend their reference from "the Texas-U.S. Southwest / Mexican border" to what "are physically present wherever

two or more cultures edge each other" (Preface). In her poetic depiction, the border is "a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" and "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko also speaks of the U.S.-Mexico border as an "unnatural boundary," in her essay entitled "the Border Patrol State" published in *The Nation* in 1994. Silko's discussion in it could be taken as another prediction of a declining international border with the role of dividing undividable land into individual national territory. This sense of territory, however, is nothing but nonsense to Silko's indigenous consciousness. Silko states: "it is no use; borders haven't worked, and they won't work, not now, as the indigenous people of the Americas reassert their kinship and solidarity with one another" (122). As a native resident of the southwestern region of the U.S., and one who is aware of her indigenous identity and cultural heritage, Silko has lived a reality in which "the great human migration within the Americas cannot be stopped; human beings are natural forces of the earth, just as rivers and winds are natural force" (123).

Chicana/o literature thus emerged with a sense grounded in the physical and psychological reality of in-betweenness: the sense, which would eventually obscure the modern definitions of nation-states and national borders. It also urges questions about the traditional understanding of American literature as well, as American literature has been believed to be a field that explores a sense of national self and the definition of Americanness. American literature has been functioning as a discipline that has formulated a national myth exploring the narrative of the United States as the ultimate community.

Therefore, when Wai Chee Dimock aptly puts it, "the nation is revealed to be what it is: an epiphenomenon, literally a superficial construct, a set of erasable lines on the face of the earth" (1), what is at stake by globalization and subsequent obscurity of the national narrative may be the narrative to construct a sense of community. If the nation is an "epiphenomenal and superficial construct," what, then, would be more appropriate than for a nation-state to be a ground for imagining a "community," a particular place where everyday human activities and lives are being accumulated and shaped into history, culture, and society? There also arises a simultaneous question about whether "community" is the appropriate term to define a sphere of residency, considering that Bhabha has expressed that moment as "gatherings" rather than "communities," emphasizing the temporal and symbolic nature of that ubiquitous space for people.

Understanding the relationship between the nation-state and the people's lived-experience requires reconsidering what "community" means from a planetary perspective. In other words, the planetary perspective comes into play in urging our view of communities to shift from nation-state-centered to place-centered. The eco-poet Gary Snyder, introducing the planetary vision for constructing a new world order based on his environmental philosophy, deconstructs the ideas of borders and nation-states in terms of "community" as a

result of humans living and working in a specific place, understanding the connection between the practices and activities in a specific local place and their impact on the planet. Snyder writes:

> Ultimately we can all lay claim to the term native and the songs and dances, the beads and feathers, and the profound responsibilities that go with it. We are all indigenous to this planet, this mosaic of wild gardens we are being called by nature and history to reinhabit in good spirit. Part of that responsibility is to choose a place. To restore the land one must live and work in a place. To work in a place is to work with others. People who work together in a place become a community, and a community, in time, grows a culture. To work on behalf of the wild is to restore culture. (250)

Snyder's "place" is synonymous with the ecosystem that sustains the lives and stories of both human and non-human inhabitants, manifesting his eco-poetic understanding that humans are responsible for sustaining an ecologically balanced environment. To restore the land means to "reinhabit" a place with a shared sense of commitment to the land, and to restore culture in the place becomes possible when people choose one place to live and work together to build a community--a community that is "local" rather than "universal," and to which more attention is paid than "to the nation state" (212).

Therefore, in a planetary perspective, the borderlands are not the political indication of national boundary but rather a place on the land where humans and non-humans live and form a community. In Anzaldúa's definition, the borderlands, on one hand, emerge as a ubiquitous places that "are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other"; however, on the other hand, they do embody a community "where people of different races occupy the same territory" and "where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch" (Preface). The history of Chicana/os attests that they have lost their direct contact with their indigenous homeland and have become immigrants, in another word, a diaspora. While they can also be identified as exiles or migrants, what would differentiate a diaspora from exiles, or immigrants from migrants, is a sense of commitment to a particular place as a result of residents' conscious process of reinhabitation of the place by relocating their home and by constructing communities through living and working in a particular place.

II. A Sense of Place and Community in the Borderlands

Cherríe Moraga's 1995 play *Circle in the Dirt: El Pueblo de East Palo Alto* offers an actual and concrete depiction of community as Anzaldúa conceptualizes the borderlands. Set in East Palo Alto, an actual town located in the San Francisco Bay Area in California, the play visualizes the East Palo Alto community's confrontation of urban gentrification caused by their upscale neighborhoods making their rising communal consciousness in resistance against a developer in

the area to be one of the play's central themes.

Moraga makes clear in her "notes from the playwright" that she expresses East Palo Alto as a community in the "borderlands": "East Palo Alto is located in the 'borderlands' of Palo Alto's affluent Stanford University community, separated by the thread-sized San Francisquito Creek, also the country line" (110). Located in the borderlands, East Palo Alto signals a community of socially marginalized people who are what Anzaldúa terms "the prohibited and forbidden," namely, "*los atravesados,*" meaning the "scoundrels" in English. Anzaldúa states that they are "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (25).

Whereas Anzaldúa initially presumes the borderlands as a place where the socially marginalized voices of "*los atravesados*" converge, Moraga describes East Palo Alto in her play as a place where "political autonomy, economic independence, and peaceful cultural co-existence" "remain difficult to achieve" (110). In order to tackle these difficult situations, Moraga with her artistic imagination thus creates a setting in which culturally diverse inhabitants co-exist and have chances to communicate with each other: "Predominantly African-American and Mexican-immigrant, with Pacific Islander, Vietnamese, Japanese and Anglo-American residents, EPA [East Palo Alto] is very much the microcosm of the changing face of 21st-century California" (110). "El Pueblo," meaning the "village" in Spanish, in the play consists of about twenty characters of different cultural descent, including such main characters as Senora Talamantes, who is a "middle-aged Mexican immigrant," Mr. Matsamuros, supposedly a Japanese-American in his 60s, Reginald, an African American in his 40s, and another African-American character called "the Professor" in his 70s.

San Francisco Bay Area is actually the place embedded with histories of different ethnic groups, and the characters in *Circle in the Dirt* deliberately represent these groups as diverse as possible. Nevertheless, cross-cultural communication among them may not be realistic; rather, it could lead more conflictive than optimistic reality. Despite the linguistic misunderstanding that Moraga falls into, e.g., her inaccurate understanding of Japanese surname, "Matsamuros," Moraga desires to express her sense of community in the borderlands by representing East Palo Alto as an imaginary space on the stage: the space that enables characters with different cultural backgrounds to exchange their life stories

The screen located above the altar at center stage works as an effective device for creating the space, as the displayed visual images of their memories facilitate the characters' sharing of their stories with each other without heavily relying on their non-native language. In the opening scene, for instance, during the dialogue between Mrs. Mai, a Vietnamese immigrant, and Mr. Matsamuros, the visual image of a Japanese American family at a WWII internment camp was projected on the screen above the altar on the stage. Looking at the image on the screen, Mrs. Mai asked, "Are those your children up there?" (120). Mrs. Mai at this point

is ignorant about the history of Japanese-American interment, but after Mr. Matsamuros tells her about his experience of the internment camp at Tule Lake and the confiscation of land and personal properties during the war, Mrs. Mai states, "Sometimes I angry about Vietnam War" (120).

As seen in this moment of solidarity between Mr. Matsamuros and Mrs. Mai based on their shared war experience, one of the predominant themes of this play is to construct a sense of community by sharing memories across cultural differences and across different historical periods. A conversation between the Professor and Chuy, a young Chicano in his early 20s, for instance, reveals a history of Mexican immigrants as told to Chuy by his "cousin," Mando. Chuy tells the Professor: "Well, anyway, that's how me and Mando hooked up. We hung out for a while and he started telling me all this stuff about how in the 30s, the government rounded up every Mexican they could, put 'em in boxcars and shipped them back to Mexico." When the Professor asks him why, Chuy replies, "The depression, man! There weren't no jobs," and he continues: "So, they didn't need Mexicans no more to do their dirty work. So, they ship us all out. Once the economy starts pickin' up again and the growers and the fabricas want workers, well it's the 'look-the-other-way' border patrol. ?Comprende?" (137).

The sharing of memories also takes place encompassing different generations and genders. Play's African-American characters, such as Reginald, Gwendolyn Wilkerson, who is Reginald's aunt, and her granddaughter, 12-year-old Nicole, and the Professor, also share their memories of each generation and the collective discourses form a narrative history of the Black community in East Palo Alto. The Professor and Reginald share their memories of the heyday of Black Power in the 60s and blame the conservative years of the Regan administration for the closing down of a black school that was founded in East Palo Alto to start teaching Black children their cultural traditions. The Black Power movement in their memories could be considered masculine, because it was fundamentally a struggle of power against leading hegemony and naturally produced a number of warriors. On the other hand, however, Gwendolyn argues the reason for the closing down from a different viewpoint, asserting that the school had to be closed because of prevailing violence, which she claims was "worse than the Klu Klux Klan because the enemy was from within" (131). She continues: "Maybe the roots of the problems were the same: poverty, lack of jobs, plain ole racism. But you couldn't put your finger on what was going on. EPA [East Palo Alto] was a war zone. A fully-incorporated war zone" (131).

These dialogues between characters manifest how they share their personal memories and viewpoints and how they teach each other across cultural differences. The teaching also happens between the stage and the audience. In the borderlands, history is collective as well as dimensional rather than linear because it is a narrative space that continues to enlarge its sphere across cultures. In other words, East Palo Alto as a borderland works as a common ground in which diverse life-stories coexist and are sometimes interconnected to make a history.

This evokes the opening scene of the play, where the "images of residents of EPA--past and present" are projected on the screen above the altar (115). The image of "a line drawing of an indigenous Muwekma" and the photographs of "a 19th-century Californio rancher, a Spanish Missionary friar, a Samoan great grandmother, a Japanese flower-grower, an Irish-American farmer, a 60s-style Black radical, a gangster, a Chicano rapper, and a pregnant chola [a young mestiza]" are shown on the screen, and they represent the collective and mixed memories of East Palo Alto.

III. "We are an earth people": Return to the Place We Call Home

As a resident of Oakland, California, and also a teacher at Stanford University, Moraga doubtless writes East Palo Alto from a local perspective. However, writing a locale actually was necessary to envision a larger perspective in which the sustenance of East Palo Alto as a community has a planetary significance. In *Circle in the Dirt,* the Professor, as a history professor, enacts a role that connects a personal memory with a memory of the place. Moraga, aware that East Palo Alto used to be the home of Ohlone Muwekma Indian tribes, attempts to recapture the memory of the original inhabitants of East Palo Alto through the words of the Professor. When Reginald asks the Professor what he is planting, the Professor replies: "It's Indian corn. Cherokee Red, Black, Aztec, Hopi, Blue Corn and Navajo rainbow" (141). The Professor then starts to shape the corn into a circle as he responds to Reginald who asks about the significance of the circle: "I'm planning this circle for the American Indians. I guess you'd say because I believe they had things right. Don't abuse anything and do not take more than you are prepared to give back" (141).

The Professor's act of shaping the corn into a circle calls another important character, who serves the function of associating people with the place. This old woman who appears on stage with Native California music is named La Capitana, and she is "mestiza" and "Ohlone/Muwekma Indian y [and] mexicana" (158). In her heavy burlap bag she is carrying "history," and she complains, "Draggin' history around is wearin' me out" (159). However, La Capitana does not intend to carry it forever, because she states: "And, little by little, I been returning our story back to the earth. Spirits wander until they're put to rest. Look out there. (Indicating the demolition) What Ohlone ghosts will this excavation bring to the surface?" (161). "Returning our story back to the earth" means that the earth holds the stories of the inhabitants, and in so doing, the lives of the community are deeply rooted in the place.

With this sense of "returning" to the earth, therefore, individuals of the community, or "El Pueblo," of East Palo Alto realize that losing a place means losing the bonds of the community, and eventually, losing the community itself. Asked what he would do if the developer demolishes the field he has been cultivating, the Professor replies: "Find another piece of dirt, I guess. Black

people, people of color in general, we are an earth people. That's under all the signs. Bet your momma knows that. We belong to the earth. And the closer we are to it, the healthier we will be. It's simple" (139). This sense of belongingness and connectedness to the earth makes the inhabitants in the borderlands aware of the planetary significance of their place. Therefore, what arrives after pondering the community and a sense of place in the borderlands is this realization: the place has to be secured for the sustenance of the community.

Toward the end of the play, La Capitana and Reginald, after a protest against the developers at the demolition site, fade into the field. Reginald never comes back to his people, and the Professor states as Reginald's smiling portrait is projected on the screen above the altar: "Nothing is supposed to last forever. One day, we'll all dissolve right back into this basis thing called earth…" (165). Reginald's smile in the portrait indicates that his death or disappearance is not tragic but is understood as his return to the earth. In other words, the play suggests that the place lasts longer than the lives of humans and non-humans and keeps the memories of its inhabitants for generations.

Though Snyder states that "part of that responsibility is to choose a place" (250), Chicana/os and other ethnic minorities do not usually "choose" to live in the borderlands. Rather, it is a consequence of their history. *Circle in the Dirt* demonstrates that people as inhabitants of a borderland can attain a planetary sense of place despite their marginalized location, the borderland called East Palo Alto, if they understand that borderlands are the places on the planet and that they are part of the life of the planet. In fact, the perception of being "marginalized" perhaps no longer has meaning in locating one's place on the planet because there is no center or periphery where there is no border. The border, or borderless consciousness, in Chicana/o literature emerges in between cultures, languages, races, genders, and other categories that continue to define and redefine Americanness and American literature by representing alternative vision of "community," if not within the nation-state of the U.S., then in the crossroads between the local and the planetary.

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